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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4459  
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RHEBAAA/USDOE WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 003444

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2017

TAGS: PREL MNUC KNNP PARM IR IS

SUBJECT: INITIAL ISRAELI REACTION TO RELEASE OF NIE  
FINDINGS ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR INTENTIONS AND CAPABILITIES

REF: STATE 162558

Classified By: Marc J. Sievers, Political Counselor.

Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (S) As of the writing of this cable, the GOI has not yet released an official reaction to the publication of the judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate report on Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions. Media citations of PM Olmert and DefMin Barak suggest that the GOI is unfazed by the report's publication, and was prepared point out aspects of the report to bolster its case for maintaining pressure on Iran. Media reporting on the NIE report is for the most part balanced -- at times making the same points we are asking host governments around the world to make, although some commentary has criticized the NIE. We expect the GOI will study the points and nonpaper further before getting back to us with an official reaction. Indications are that interagency discussion is already taking place. END SUMMARY.

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INITIAL COMMENTS FROM THE MFA ON THE NIE REPORT  
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12. (S) Responding to instructions in reftel, PolCouns and poloff delivered points and nonpaper on the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report to Israeli MFA Deputy Director General (Strategic Affairs) Miriam Ziv. In conveying the points to Ziv, PolCouns emphasized that the report does not mean that the USG is easing pressure on Iran, which the NIE notes can restart its weapons program at any time. Ziv agreed, but was concerned about the message the report could send to partners, especially European allies. She feared that the Europeans, who have been moving forward with sanctions, will now lose urgency and will not take action on their own. She said many European countries, such as Italy, had already been expressing doubts about the need to enact European sanctions outside the UN.

13. (S) Ziv pointed out that the NIE key judgments, which she had already read in the Israeli press, were not that different from Israeli intelligence estimates, including the timeframes. However, she underscored, Israel is planning for the worst-case scenario of Iran having a bomb by late 2009 - early 2010, which the NIE judges as "unlikely" but does not exclude. Israel also believes that Iran has an ongoing weapons program. She reiterated the point that any stoppage

was a political decision, and the international community should not allow the Iranian regime to decide when it will be armed with nuclear weapons.

¶14. (S) Ziv said that the GOI has no official reaction to the report yet, the publication of which she indicated took her by surprise. She said she would be meeting with an interagency group later in the day to discuss it. Ziv said that it will be difficult to calibrate the GOI response because they do not agree with all the findings, but they also do not want to go against the United States. She added that she will want to discuss this issue in detail when Acting Under Secretary John Rood visits Israel later this month.

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IAEC REACTION TO NIE REPORT CAUTIOUS  
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¶15. (S) Embassy also shared reftel points and nonpaper with Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) Nonproliferation Department Director Gil Reich early December 4. Reich, who was eager to receive the information, said he would respond after he and his colleagues in the IAEC have carefully considered it.

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IDF TO CONTINUE PREPARING FOR WORST CASE  
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¶16. (S) In a meeting late December 3, Israeli Defense Intelligence Chief MGEN Amos Yadlin told visiting U.S. National Guard Commander LTG Steven Blum, "We are convinced

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that Iran is on a path to develop a nuclear weapon. We have no choice but to err on the side of caution. We may differ on timing, but there is no doubt in our mind." Yadlin went on to stress that Israel had to take Iranian President Ahmadinejad's comments about destroying Israel at face value: 'We cannot afford to repeat the kind of mistakes that were made with Hitler in Munich.' IDF Ground Forces Commander MGEN Benny Gantz told Blum early December 4 that Iran remains Israel's "number one concern" in spite of U.S. assessments, and that there is no change in IDF thinking about the need to prepare for the worst case scenario.

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INITIAL MEDIA REPORTS SUGGEST GOI OFFICIALS UNFAZED  
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¶17. (U) PM Olmert was quoted as saying December 4 that he had discussed the NIE with U.S. leaders during his visit to Washington for the Annapolis Conference. According to the Internet daily, YNET, he said, "Even after this report, the American stance will still focus on preventing Iran from attaining nuclear capability. We will expend every effort along with our friends in the U.S. to prevent the Iranians from developing nuclear weapons." The left-leaning Ha'aretz newspaper later cited Prime Minister Olmert as suggesting that the U.S. report proves the need for tighter sanctions.

¶18. (U) Army Radio cited DefMin Ehud Barak December 4 as saying "It seems Iran in 2003 halted for a certain period of time its military nuclear program, but as far as we know, it has probably since revived it."

¶19. (U) The Jerusalem Post quoted National Infrastructures Minister Ben-Eliezer December 4 as saying, "Israel must continue to act in every way against the Iranian nuclear threat, irrespective of the U.S. intelligence report. This report is totally fine. It makes me smile. But on the other hand, Israel and the defense establishment are working under the premise that Iran is in fact heading directly toward it (a nuclear weapon.) This is exactly one of the issues over which the State of Israel must take no risk."

¶10. (U) Ha'aretz Diplomatic Correspondent Aluf Benn suggested that the NIE's release on December 3 had not taken the GOI by surprise. Benn reported that PM Olmert, FM Livni and DefMin Barak were all briefed on the NIE during their visit to Washington in connection with the Annapolis Conference.

Benn's article made a point we are requesting governments worldwide to make in public comments on the NIE, namely that Iran stopped developing its military nuclear capabilities due to international pressure. The Ha'aretz article, however, also claims to quote "political sources in Israel" as suggesting that the NIE report implies that the Bush Administration has "lost its sense of urgency and determination" to carry out a military strike against Iran in ¶2008. The same unnamed sources reportedly told Ha'aretz that the U.S. is unlikely to strike Iran in 2008, and will continue to pursue more severe sanctions.

¶11. (U) An article published by Jerusalem Post Diplomatic Correspondent Herb Keinon implied that the GOI was ready to use the contents of the report to strengthen its case against Iran. Keinon's article claims that GOI officials said late December 3 that the new report had not lessened Israeli concerns, since enriched uranium can be used for both civilian and military purposes. It quoted an unidentified Israeli official as saying that the U.S. showed Israel the NIE in advance, and that there was enough evidence in it to "factually support our most grave concerns about the Iranian nuclear program." The official adds that the fact that a more moderate Iranian regime denied the existence of a military nuclear program prior to 2003 shows that the Iranians "were lying all along" and cannot be trusted. The article notes that uranium that Iran is currently enriching for civilian nuclear reactors could be diverted to covert nuclear sites to make enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb.

¶12. (U) Sounding a more critical note, Ha'aretz featured an analysis later on December 4 by Amir Oren claiming that Iran was "laughing at the U.S. lack of nuclear intelligence," and

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suggesting that that the NIE key judgments enable Iran's ruling regime and the IRGC to conclude that the U.S. "has no understanding of what is really happening in Iran's nuclear program." Oren goes on to suggest that the NIE's key judgments were published to ensure that the U.S. intelligence community would not be blamed for another Iraq should military action be taken against Iran. Oren raises for discussion how a government is to interpret "indicative signs" in the face of a devious and determined enemy. He also wonders how a government is to evaluate developments in a country's nuclear field when, as he portrays it, "there are no actual objects which can be felt, and before tests have been conducted." Oren concludes that there is no great difference between worse- and best-case views on when Iran will be capable of producing a nuclear weapon. He nevertheless suggests that the publication of the NIE key findings was done at the behest of a CIA angry with President Bush, and ready to help the next U.S. president. He predicts this will encourage Iranian militancy as well as hardening President Bush and Vice President Cheney's determination to act, "regardless of what the intelligence agencies say."

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